

The “Three Hands” Icon of the Mother of God



Come, let us rejoice in the Ever-Virgin for her abundant goodness; come, let us bow before our Queen, the Mother of God; come, let us fall down and kiss her icon, "Of the Three Hands," which, by the will of the All-Immaculate Virgin, was brought to the Hilandar Monastery on a donkey led by no one. As we venerate it, let us pray fervently: O All-Merciful Protector and Defender, cover and shield us from all spiritual and bodily afflictions and grant us a life free from sin, to conceive and bear fruits of repentance.

(Sticheron at “Lord, I have cried,” Tone 2)

The Iconoclastic heresy swept through the Byzantine Empire in the 7th century. Emperor Leo III, the Isaurian, ascended the throne and initiated persecutions against the veneration of icons. Despite being under Muslim rule, the Caliphate of Damascus allowed Orthodox Christians freedom in their faith. Priests, monks, and laypeople fled there to escape the heretical emperor’s persecution.

The chief minister of Caliph Yazid II ibn Abd al-Malik was Yūḥana ibn Manṣūr ibn Sarjūn, a devout Christian who enjoyed the caliph’s complete trust. The monarch was not troubled by his advisor’s faith — his father was also an Orthodox Christian and faithfully served the Damascene court. One day, Sergius (the name of Yūḥana’s father) encountered a monk at a slave market, shedding tears in deep sorrow as he had no one to inherit his profound knowledge and spiritual

experience. After buying the monk's freedom, Sergius tasked him with teaching his children, Yūhana and Cosmas, his adopted son. These two would later become illustrious figures of the Orthodox Church — Saint John of Damascus and Saint Cosmas of Maiuma.

The monk's pupils received much wisdom, as demonstrated by St. John's influential work, *Three Apologies Against Those Who Decry Holy Icons*. The Damascene official zealously used his vast knowledge and talent to combat Iconoclasm. He sent letters to his many acquaintances in Byzantium, using Holy Scripture and patristic traditions to affirm the correctness of icon veneration. His writings, secretly copied and shared among individuals, fueled Orthodox believers' faith and shed light on the Iconoclast heretics' mistakes.



St. John of Damascus lived in the 7th-8th centuries in Syria. A Syrian by origin, an Orthodox Christian by faith, and an aristocrat by background, he served as a high-ranking logothete (minister and advisor in the tax administration) in the Arab Caliphate.

Eventually, Yūhana's activities came to unnerve even the Iconoclast emperor. The heretics then resorted to their favourite tactic — deception. This time, however, their lies were not about doctrinal matters but aimed at their defender's reputation. The Damascene minister faced slander before the caliph, with accusations of conspiracy and treason against him.

A scribe forged a letter in Yūhana's handwriting, addressed to Leo III, supposedly promising to surrender Damascus to the Byzantines. This deceitful message was presented to Caliph Yazid II by the cunning emperor-heretic. Unaware of Leo's malicious plot, the caliph chose not to

investigate further. He brutally punished his loyal servant by sentencing Yūḥana to have his right hand cut off, which he then displayed in the marketplace.

According to tradition, Yūḥana pleaded with the caliph to return his severed hand. With tears streaming down his face, he prayed fervently before an ancient icon of the Mother of God. Exhausted from moral anguish and physical pain, he finally fell asleep. In his dream, the Holy Theotokos appeared to him and said: “Behold, your hand is healed; do not grieve any longer and diligently labour with this hand.” When Yūḥana awoke and unwrapped the cloth binding his wrist, only a red scar remained as a reminder of his wound. In gratitude to his miraculous Healer, Yūḥana composed the beautiful hymn “All Creation Rejoices in You.” To commemorate his miraculous healing, he attached a silver replica of his hand to the icon before which he had prayed. From then on, this image of the Mother of God became known as “Of the Three-Hands.”

News of Mansur's healing quickly spread throughout Damascus. Convinced by the miracle of his minister's innocence, the caliph sought Mansur's forgiveness and urged him to return to his governmental duties. However, Mansur's heart now belonged solely to God. Henceforth, he would dedicate all his strength and abilities to serving Him. Taking the icon that had bestowed healing upon him, Mansur withdrew to Palestine, where he took monastic vows as John. Tradition holds that this was at the Lavra of Saint Sabbas the Sanctified.



Tomb of St John of Damascus and his cell in the Lavra of Saint Sabbas the Sanctified, Holy Land.

The icon remained in Saint Sabbas's monastery until the thirteenth century. Before he died in 532 AD, Saint Sabbas bequeathed his staff for a royal pilgrim named Sabbas, a great archbishop and man of God, to receive upon visiting the monastery from a distant western land in the future. Seven hundred years later, Saint Sabbas, the first Archbishop of Serbia, fulfilled this prophecy during his pilgrimage to holy sites in Palestine. The monks presented him with Saint Sabbas's blessing and gave him two miraculous icons: The Mother of God "Milk-Giver" and "Of the Three Hands."



Saint Sabbas of Serbia receiving the staff and icon of "Of the Three Hands" at the Lavra of Saint Sabbas the Sanctified

Therefore, the icon made its journey to Serbia in the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century, during the Turkish invasion, pious custodians placed it on a donkey and released it into God's care to prevent desecration.

With the precious cargo on its back, the donkey trod unhindered to the Holy Mountain of Athos, halting at the Serbian Hilandar Monastery, where the brethren greeted it with reverence. They placed the icon in the main church's sanctuary. At the discovery site, a small wall rose, bearing a painted image of the Most Holy Theotokos in memory of the miraculous event. On 25 July, the Orthodox Church marks this occasion with a service, celebrating the Icon "Of the Three Hands" and its miraculous journey to Hilandar Monastery.

The icon continued to manifest its miraculous powers on Mount Athos. It protected Hilandar Monastery from foreign invasions on multiple occasions. During the Russo-Turkish wars, Turkish witnesses reported seeing a mysterious woman, impervious to humans and weaponry, above the monastery walls. Here is one such account: once, “Franks” planned to attack the monastery. They divided into two groups and approached the monastery walls from opposite directions — one group from above, the other from below. They met at the icon’s original discovery site by a wall. Seized by fear, they mistook each other for enemies and fought fiercely, leaving no survivors.

The monks gathered to elect a new abbot, following the Athonite tradition where the resident monks elect abbots. However, division among them prevented a unanimous decision. When they returned for service next morning, they again found the icon in the abbot’s place, much to their astonishment. The brethren returned to its usual spot in the altar and sealed the church doors after evening service. Yet, the icon reappeared in the abbot’s seat three times. One of the reclusive monks received a divine revelation in his sleep: the Most Holy Theotokos Herself wished to govern the monastery.

Since then, Hilandar Monastery has been without an abbot; the monks only elect a deputy. They hold the icon of the Queen of Heaven “Of the Three Hands” in high esteem as their abbess and seek blessings by venerating the hand of the Most Holy Theotokos for their pious duties.



Abbess of Hilandar. The Icon “Of the Three Hands” is placed in the abbot’s seat within the monastery. To the right of the miraculous icon is the deputy’s stasidia.

Over time, the icon “Of the Three Hands” became one of the most renowned miraculous images of the Theotokos. Copies of the Hilandar icon spread across the Christian world, celebrated for their miracles in many cities and villages of Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania. The first copy of the icon “Of the Three Hands” was brought to Russia in 1661 by Archimandrite Theophanes of Kostamonit Monastery. Patriarch Nikon, who commissioned a copy of the icon later named “Troeruchitsa,” presented it to the New Jerusalem Monastery of the Resurrection. Today, the New Jerusalem Museum collection houses a copy of this icon made in 1854, but the original has been lost. Devotees can find revered copies in Moscow’s Dormition Church of the Bulgarian Compound and the Trinity Cathedral of St. Daniel’s Monastery. The Russian Orthodox Church holds a special celebration on 11 July to commemorate the arrival of this icon’s copy.



A modern copy of the icon of the Mother of God “Of the Three Hands” (Troeruchitsa), brought from the Hilandar Monastery to the St. Elisabeth Convent in Minsk.

In the early 18th century, Moscow iconographers Artemy Fyodorov and Athanasy Ivanov created a copy of the image brought from Hilandar. They donated it to the new monastery in Belye Berega, near Bryansk.

The founder of the Bryansk Beloberezhsky Monastery of St. John the Baptist, Elder Serapion (in the schema, Simeon), cultivated deep reverence for this image, which became known as the Beloberezhskaya Icon of the Mother of God and served as a prototype for numerous copies that spread across Russia. In the Beloberezhsky Monastery, the brethren laid a new five-domed church in honour of the icon. The monastery received up to five thousand pilgrims annually

seeking the miraculous image. The miraculous Mother of God icon, shown on worshippers' notes for health prayers, provided healing to anyone seeking her intercession.

The founder of the Holy Trinity Monastery in Kiev, Venerable Elder Jonah, spent more than ten years in ascetic labours at the Beloberezhsky Monastery by the blessing of Venerable Seraphim of Sarov. He witnessed numerous miracles attributed to the Troeruchitsa icon. Following God's command, Venerable Jonah relocated to Kiev and constructed a monastery dedicated to the Holy Life-Giving Trinity. He consecrated the monastery church's first altar in honour of the Icon of the Mother of God "Troeruchitsa." At his behest, the Beloberezhsky Monastery created and sent a copy of the local icon to the Trinity Monastery. Venerable Jonah took great comfort in praying before this icon, renowned for manifesting numerous healings.



The Beloberezhskaya Troeruchitsa Icon in the Church of St. Nicholas at St. Elisabeth Convent, Minsk.

The Royal Family prayed before the Icon "Troeruchitsa" in the Ipatiev House on the eve of their martyrdom. Today, this icon is housed in the Church on Blood in Honour of All Saints Resplendent in the Russian Land, built on the site where Emperor Nicholas II, his family, and four servants spent their final days and met their martyr's end on the night of 17 July 1918.

This icon, which became a spiritual witness to the sufferings and martyrdom of the Royal Passion-Bearers and their loyal subjects, was found in the Ipatiev House by an officer who was a close acquaintance of Emperor Nicholas II's sister, Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna. The officer transported the icon to Denmark and handed it over to relatives of the Royal Family. Olga Alexandrovna bequeathed the icon to her eldest son, Tikhon Nikolaevich Kulikovsky-Romanov,

who wished to transfer it to the Church on Blood. The icon arrived in Yekaterinburg in 2003 and is now accessible for veneration by all believers.



The Troeruchitsa Icon returns to the Church on Blood from the Ipatiev House, its home during the Royal Passion-Bearers' confinement, Yekaterinburg, 2003.

The icon of the Mother of God “Of the Three Hands”, or “Troeruchitsa,” is renowned for its numerous miracles and healings. Women pray before this icon for the blessing of childbirth, health, and assistance in seemingly hopeless situations. They also seek protection from slander and false accusations. Nowadays, the chimes of the National Art Gallery building in Yoshkar-Ola serve as a unique homage to this miraculous image.

In 1993, Patriarch Alexis II of Moscow and All Russia blessed the establishment of the independent Yoshkar-Ola and Mari Diocese with this very icon. Symbolizing the arrival of the Mother of God on Mari land, a dynamic sculptural composition titled “The Appearance of the Icon of the Holy Virgin “Of the Three Hands” was created at the local Technological University with the approval and blessing of Metropolitan John of Yoshkar-Ola and Mari. Each hour during the day, to the chanting of the hymn “Rejoice, O Virgin Theotokos,” the miraculous image of the Virgin “Of the Three Hands” appears in an opening window in the upper left corner of the clock tower after the chimes sound. The window then closes, and from the gates marked “Hilandar,” a bronze donkey weighing 450 kilograms emerges, carrying the icon of the Holy Virgin.



Yoshkar-Ola's city clock showcasing the dynamic sculpture "The Appearance of the Icon of the Mother of God 'Of the Three Hands'"

The donkey's emergence illustrates the narrative of the icon's arrival at Mount Athos in the Church tradition. Leading the procession towards the Assumption Church in Yoshkar-Ola, the donkey bearing the icon symbolizes the sacred relic's arrival on Mari land. The donkey enters through the lower right gates, which then close, and in the upper right corner, the blessing image of the Queen of Heaven reappears.

Holy Sovereign Lady, Merciful Mother, do not abandon us with your protection and mighty assistance.

Beholding your most pure image, O Merciful Mother of God, we truly see You Yourself, O Theotokos, and hear Your sweet voice, which You proclaimed with authority to Your first-written icon: "With this icon is My grace." That same grace is truly present in similar images and abounds in the icon "Of the Three Hands," which we venerate and offer our thanks to You: Rejoice, O Full of Grace, the Lord is with You, and because of You He Is with us, saving us always.

Sticheron at Praises, Tone 8

This material was prepared by the editorial team at obitel-minsk.ru

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